

Resiliency and women exiting sex trade industry work

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Resiliency and Women Exiting Sex Trade Industry Work

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Abstract

Summary: A qualitative approach was used to explore the experience of exiting sex trade industry work from the perspective of 19 adults formerly involved in the sex trade industry. A narrative approach to data collection was used to explore the participants' experiences of successful exiting and phenomenological analysis was employed to identify themes that reflected the ways in which participants developed resiliency throughout the exiting process.

Findings: Themes include: connection (including subthemes: survivor presence, children, and spirituality), resources (including subthemes: networks, structure and safety) and personal growth.

Significance: These themes represent women with diverse experiences in the sex trade industry, including a majority who were victimized by (internal) sex trafficking. The findings demonstrate opportunities for social work practice to address the diverse needs of individuals exiting the sex trade industry, specifically for those who experienced sex trafficking and sexual exploitation.

Introduction

Adult women's experiences of sex trade industry¹ work have been a focus for researchers throughout the last 15 years. Research has been conducted primarily with women exiting street-based sex work (Månsson & Hedin, 1999; Williamson, & Folaron, 2003), and women in the process of exiting or still working in the sex trade industry (Dalla, 2006; Davis, 2000; Sanders, 2007). Much of the focus has been on the process of exiting illegal and/or coerced sex work and the complex individual, relational, and structural barriers that make voluntarily exiting difficult. While researchers have identified the importance of social support (Hedin & Månsson, 2003; Hotaling, Burris, Johnson, Bird, & Melbye, 2004) and access to services that meet varied and often extensive needs (Baker, Williamson, & Dalla, 2010), much of the research on these supports and services are conducted in the context of current service provision or evaluation (e.g. Arnold, et al., 2000; Davis, 2000; Roe-Sepowitz, et al., 2011). The present study examines exiting from the perspective of women who have experienced sex trade industry work in the United States, in both indoor and outdoor commercial sex venues, and explores the helping factors, experiences, and beliefs instrumental in promoting resiliency throughout the exiting process. The research question for this study is: How do women formerly involved in the sex trade industry describe the helping factors that helped build resilience throughout the exiting process?

Literature Review

¹ In considering the many controversies surrounding terminology used to describe sex trafficking, sexual exploitation, prostitution, sex trading, and sex work (Gerassi, 2015), the term 'sex trade industry' will be used throughout in referring to the business of selling or trading sexual services for something of value.

The secretive nature of the sex trade industry in the United States makes it difficult to identify people selling sex in outdoor venues (e.g. streets, cars, truck stops) and indoor venues (e.g. hotels/motels, brothels, gentlemen's clubs, massage parlors)(Williamson, & Folaron, 2003). Estimates of average age at entry into commercial sex work range from 12-14 (Nadon, Koverola, & Schludermann, 1998; Silbert & Pines, 1982) to 22 years of age (Kramer & Berg, 2003). However, these estimates do very little to help explain the diversity of experiences among women and girls who exchange sex for the first time at very different points in their lives, and for many different reasons (Martin, Hearst, & Widome, 2010).

It is well documented that women in the sex trade industry report high rates of abuse (Davis, 2000; Nadon, et al., 1998; Potterat, et al., 1998). They are at risk for being exploited by pimps and traffickers (Williamson & Cluse-Tolar, 2002) and sustaining injuries from repeated violence (Raphael, Reichert, & Powers, 2010; Valera, Safalti, James, & Ferguson, 2008; Sawyer, & Shiraldi, 2001). They are at risk for developing mental and physical health problems (Farley & Kelly, 2000; Williamson & Folaron, 2003), and/or experiencing emotional and psychological consequences related to being stigmatized or feeling forced to keep their involvement in sex work a secret (Sanders, 2004). Sex trade industry work is frequently associated with drug use (Wiechelt & Shdaimah, 2011), and regular drug use can lead to drug dependency. Women with moderate to severe drug dependency are more likely to engage in sex work than women who are not addicted to drugs (Hossain, Zimmerman, Abas, Light, & Watts, 2010; McClanahan, et al., 1999), thus perpetuating the cycle of remaining vulnerable to risks associated with sex trade industry work. An accumulation of legal offenses (Finn,

Muftić, & Marsh, 2014; Maxwell & Maxwell, 2000) and isolation from positive social support (Williamson & Cluse-Tolar, 2002) make exiting sex trade industry work difficult, if they want to do so. These experiences are complicated by the many structural inequalities that women engaging in sex trade industry work often face, including poverty (Martin, et al., 2010; Monroe, 2005) gendered inequality, racism, and social conditions that are not easily remedied by framing both illegal sex work and sex trafficking as problems that can be defined entirely by the criminal justice system (Farrell, & Fahy, 2009).

Their experiences are also complicated by competing discourses in the United States and throughout the world regarding the prevalence of sex trafficking and the relationship between international and domestic/'internal' sex trafficking and the sex trade industry (see Baker, 2015 for a helpful overview of these discourses). While some researchers and activists are concerned about the underreporting of sex trafficking in the sex trade industry (Hopper, 2004), others are concerned that conflating sex trafficking and sex work is harmful to sex workers not victimized by sex trafficking (Doherty & Harris, 2015; Weitzer, 2007). These competing discourses continue to help refine and shape 1) how services are provided, 2) how vulnerability, agency, and consent are constructed, and 3) how popular notions about the 'ideal' victim are problematic (Hoyle, Boworth, & Demsey, 2011) for sex trafficking victims and sex workers alike.

Exiting the Sex Trade Industry

The word 'exiting' often implies that sex industry work is universally harmful. In reality, it includes a 'diverse range of labour agreements and experiences' (Law, 2013, p. 101) and so our understanding of exiting must reflect this diversity. For some women,

exiting is a means of escape from a situation involving sex trafficking; for others, it is a transition, as Fuch Ebaugh (1988) describes, from one role into another. Regardless of why they decide to exit, women need the opportunity to form supportive, emotionally secure relationships, have access to support services, and economic assistance and/or employment (Dalla, 2006). Intervention services currently helping women meet these needs take a variety of forms including outreach (Yahne, Miller, Irvin-Vitela, & Tonigan, 2002), case management (Arnold, Stewart, & McNeece, 2000; Davis, 2000) diversion programs (Roe-Sepowitz, Hickie, Loubert, Egan, 2011; Wahab, 2006) and residential treatment (Roe-Sepowitz, Hickie, & Cimino, 2011; Ward, & Roe-Sepowitz, 2009). Research on exiting the sex trade industry emphasizes the important role that positive social relationships play in helping to facilitate and support the exiting process (Dalla, Xia, & Kennedy, 2003). Women lacking positive support may struggle to leave behind negative social networks (Davis, 2000) and feel isolated. In a study of 23 Swedish former sex trade industry workers, contact with family, including rebuilding relationships with children and forming new relationships with helping professionals, friends, and romantic partners were essential to successfully exiting (Hedin & Månsson, 2003).

Formal support service needs include drug and alcohol detox and/or treatment, and legal services (Arnold, et al., 2000) that assist in regaining custody of children or obtaining a divorce or order of protection against abusive partners. While these services may be available (e.g. via domestic violence shelters or access to services providing for general physical and mental health), prior research suggests the need for treatment tailored to specifically address the multi-faceted needs of sex trade industry workers (Dalla, 2006; Hedin and Månsson, 2003; Roe-Sepowitz, et al., 2011).

Women exiting the sex trade industry may also need to develop job skills and gain access to other employment opportunities. For women without any job experience outside the sex trade industry, limited education, and dependents to support, this can be impossible without financial assistance. Having a criminal record is another barrier to employment (Maxwell & Maxwell, 2000). Despite these significant barriers, women continue to exit with varied access to support services, demonstrating resiliency by overcoming obstacles and adapting to difficult circumstances as they move through the exiting process (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014).

Understanding Resiliency

Resilience is a concept broadly characterized as the ability to ‘bounce back’ following negative experiences and to adapt in the face of stressful situations (Tugade, & Fredrickson, 2004). Individuals demonstrating resilience are often studied for the purpose of identifying characteristics or skills that explain their ability to adapt and maintain healthy functioning when others struggle (Jew, Green, & Kroger, 1999; Tugade & Frederickson, 2004). Resiliency can also be defined as a combination of personal, social, and physical resources (de Terte, Becker, & Stephens, 2009) that emerge as an individual interacts with her/his environment. This perspective was utilized by Meschke and Patterson (2003) to describe how people recovering from substance misuse develop resiliency throughout the recovery process. Utilizing ecological systems theory as a framework for understanding resiliency, they explained that decisions regarding substance use/misuse happen in the context of multiple social systems presenting any number of risk and protective factors. An individual develops resiliency when supportive elements across their ecosystem provide “chains of protective factors” that work together

to support and protect them in the face of adversity (Meschke & Patterson, 2003, p. 488). They explain that these factors can be relational (i.e. a mentor, teacher, or social worker), physical (e.g. relocation to a safer living environment), and individual, as experienced by someone with improved mental health, self-esteem, or in recovery from addiction. Individuals who lack supports across their ecosystem are at a disadvantage. They may be less likely to seek out new supports or feel a lack of confidence in their ability to form attachments with trusted individuals and institutions that build social capital (Oliver & Cheff, 2014) and mitigate the impact of adversity.

Though research identifies some of the protective factors associated with a successful exit from the sex trade industry (i.e. Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014), findings are often embedded in the context of an intervention (e.g. Diversion, case management, or outreach program), focused on a single aspect of protection or support (e.g. social, financial) and the research has most often included women exiting street-based sex work (for an exception, see Sanders, 2007).

Method

Sample

Nineteen adult women were recruited to participate in a study about exiting the sex trade industry. A majority of participants identified as White ($n = 11$), followed by Hispanic ($n = 4$), Black ($n = 3$) and biracial ($n = 1$). At the time of the interviews, participants ranged in age from 25-59 ($M = 44.5$ years). Age at entry into the sex trade industry ranged from 13 to 31 ($M = 20.6$ years). Twelve participants (67%) were victimized by sex trafficking as it is defined by the TVPA² (2000). Specifically, nine

² The TVPA was enacted at the same time, and with much of the same language and intent, as the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons- known widely as the Palermo

participants reported first engaging in sex work before age 18 (and five of the nine also reported working for a pimp). Three participants who entered the sex trade industry as adults also reported working for a trafficker (or ‘pimp’) at some point. Participants spent between two to 31 years involved in the sex trade industry, and the average length of time involved was 14.7 years ($SD= 9.5$). At the time of the interview, the length of time spent out of sex work ranged from 3 to 27 years; a majority ($n= 16$; 84%) had been out for 10 years or less. The most common type of sex work participants engaged in was street-based sex work ($n=16$; 84%), though a majority of participants ($n=12$; 63%) reported more than one type of sex work (see Table 1). Participants described using a diverse range of services at the time of the interview, including two currently involved in court-ordered programming. Those who discussed current service utilization in any detail described primarily voluntary service utilization (e.g. twelve step groups and mental health therapies).

Procedure

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit individuals who 1) were age 18 or older, 2) had some experience with selling or trading sexual services for money or other commodities, and 3) self-reported that a minimum of two years’ time has passed since they last sold or traded sex. The literature on a length of time out of illegal sex trade industry work that best predicts long-term success is sparse, though Roe-Sepowitz, et al. (2011) found that among individuals arrested for prostitution and enrolled in a prostitution diversion program, a majority who recidivated did so within the first 10 months of the arrest. While measures of recidivism do not accurately capture the number

Protocol (Doherty, & Harris, 2015). The Palermo Protocol provides an internationally accepted definition of human trafficking.

of individuals participating in illegal activity, it still may indicate that the first 10 months are a crucial period of time for recidivism, and that individuals who are not rearrested within this time frame are more likely to permanently exit. Thus, it was determined that a minimum of two years (over twice as long as the 10 month time frame) since last involvement in sex trade industry work was sufficient criteria for this study. Participants were recruited through a network of women involved as volunteers, employees, and/or former clients of a residential program for women exiting the sex trade industry in a large southwestern city in the United States. Initial participants recruited friends to participate, and this snowball sampling technique was utilized to identify and interview 19 adult women, a number determined to be sufficient as a point of data saturation had been reached (Bowen, 2008). Interviews progressed; participants' narratives echoed similar themes, despite experiencing sex trade industry work in very different ways.

Data Collection

All interviews took place between February and April 2013 at a city-funded prostitution diversion program office building known to participants. They were given the option to choose another location but all participants were familiar with the office location and chose to come there. Interviews began by providing an information letter to participants (in lieu of an informed consent document to ensure anonymity). Participants filled out a brief demographic questionnaire and identified a pseudonym that would be used to link their questionnaire to the audiotaped interviews. The pseudonyms chosen by participants are also used to provide anonymity when presenting the results of the study. Participants were provided with a \$20 gift card to a local store as compensation for participation.

A narrative approach to data collection was selected for its emphasis on collecting stories about the lived experiences of individuals, how these experiences unfold over time (Creswell, et al., 2007), and how they are situated within personal, cultural, and historical contexts. Participants were asked to tell the story of their exit from sex work, or however they defined their involvement in the sex trade industry. As part of their stories, participants explained experiences that served to build resiliency, providing both the means and motivation to exit. To elicit greater detail about key factors that helped them successfully exit, participants were prompted with few additional questions including: 1) “Can you tell me about the people who helped you get out?” and 2) “What kinds of services were helpful to you, such as counseling, treatment, case management, safe housing?” Interviews, lasting between 21 to 57 minutes (M= 38 minutes) were audio-taped, transcribed, and entered into the NVivo software package for the purpose of analyzing textual data. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Arizona State University.

Data Analysis

A phenomenological analysis is well suited to revealing meaning inherent in the narratives people tell about their experiences (Ricoeur, as cited in Riessman & Quinney, 2005), and as such, was considered an appropriate approach to analyzing the narrative data collected for this study. An audit trail and reflective journal were kept to record the process of understanding and defining themes. Throughout the process, other researchers and practitioners with knowledge on this topic provided feedback, including one Masters level researcher who read approximately 30% (N=6 interviews) of the anonymized data; we met frequently and underwent a process of discussing discrepancies in interpretation

and resolving them as a team (Brotto, Heiman, & Tolman, 2009). Member checking was utilized, as three participants were asked to verify the interpretation of their interview transcripts and the overall findings from the study. These participants are also employed as case managers working with adults involved in the sex trade industry, and agreed with the themes and overall findings.

Limitations

All participants included in this study are adult women, and so results are not generalizable for men, transgender individuals, or children and young people under age 18. Five participants exited sex trade industry work ten or more years prior to their interviews, and so there is a potential for recall bias (Fenton, Johnson, McManus, & Erens, 2001). A third limitation is the absence of any former sex trade industry workers that viewed sex work as a healthy and viable choice for them. Instead, the perspective in this study is shaped by the experiences of participants who all chose to leave the sex trade industry, with the exception of two who exited involuntarily as a result of injuries following extreme violence perpetrated by customers. They all believed that engaging in sex trade industry work was not something they chose willingly, and over half described experiences of force or coercion that meet the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (2000) definition of sex trafficking. All participants described wanting and/or attempting to exit several times before they exited a final time. An additional limitation is a lack of generalizability due to interviewing women living in one southwestern city in the United States. Narratives are nested within a particular cultural context (Muller, 1999), and all participants told stories embedded within the context of the southwestern United States.

Results

While undergoing a process of exiting, participants described three factors that facilitated their exit, conceptualized here as the themes: connections, resources, and personal growth. Connections included subthemes: ‘survivor’ presence, children, and spirituality; resources included the development of new (social) networks, and accessing resources that provided structure and safety. Personal growth was described as feelings of empowerment and a fear of consequences. These factors served to build resiliency and represent the personal, social, and physical resources that participants drew upon as they moved through the exiting process.

Connections

When narrating their experiences of exiting, participants frequently described how feeling connected to others was vital to their exiting journey. Nearly all (n=16) participants spoke about the important connections with other former sex trade industry workers, parents, children, friends, and staff members in community organizations. Feeling connected helped reduce feelings of isolation, shame, stigma and provided motivation for women to follow through with their goals. Subthemes that exemplify the connections participants made in the exiting process include: survivor presence, children, and spirituality.

Survivor Presence

A primary means of connection for participants in this study came in the form of friendship, solidarity, and presence of other “survivors”- the term many used to describe former sex trade industry workers. Thirteen participants spoke at length about the impact of women who exited sex trade industry work before them, or women who were exiting alongside them and could relate to their struggles. They met survivors involved in street

outreach, programming specifically targeted to help sex trade industry workers, and in other programs. One participant, a 43-year-old woman who was first trafficked at age 15, spoke of the unique connections she had with other women while living in a halfway house for people in addiction recovery:

I used to walk up to that house bawling at the end of the day because I still walked like a prostitute, still talked like a prostitute, didn't know how to carry myself and guys were still trying to pick me up. I was trying to stay sober and not turn tricks. But the house mom was so awesome. She used to be a prostitute. She had years out of the industry so she would joke with me and she'd be like, "What are you going to a slut fest? Look at you"... She would make me laugh, but she was who I was. So that played such a huge role. It was comforting and it gave me hope. (*"Sarah"*)

Annie, a 25-year-old woman also sex trafficked at age 15, described initially exiting sex trade industry work as a result of undergoing treatment heroin addiction. While in treatment, she got to know women who had prior experience with the sex trade industry as well. She said,

Having a network of women that I could sit with in those moments was a lot of it...I don't think there's a chance in hell that any of the women that you're dealing with are going to open up, are going to change, are going to get any better unless they can find somebody they can relate to. (*"Annie"*)

Likewise, Candy credits being connected with other former sex trade industry workers as the key component to her recovery; after initially entering treatment for a heroin addiction, she realized that her experience in the sex industry left her feeling isolated and stigmatized, so she moved into a residential program for prostituted women, saying, "I went in there to be with other prostitutes and I fit right in, and I was also getting my drug habit [treated], too...I [was] back with the prostitutes, the old prostitutes because they can relate to me."

A number of women also emphasized the formal role that survivors should play in treatment and recovery programs. One participant, a 49-year-old woman who spent 18 years in the sex trade industry explained:

Women that have success, women that have been there, that have done this...somebody that has actually lived that lifestyle and can say, 'I remember being afraid...[but] now I can't imagine doing what I did- the girl that I used to be.'...Women coming in and sharing their stories, anybody that has been there and done that and now is living a safe life or a drug free life can greatly impact, I believe. (*"Party Girl"*)

When discussing the role of peers in the exiting process, women who had experienced sex trafficking did not specify that they only felt supported by other former sex trafficking victims. The degree to which someone had been forced, coerced, or otherwise victimized by sex trafficking was not discussed. Instead, participants emphasized the positive experience of feeling connected to others who had experienced sex trade industry work.

Children

Like many women involved in sex trade industry work (Sloss & Harper, 2004), a majority (n=13) of participants in this study had children before or during their involvement in the sex trade industry. Many women who discussed broken relationships with children as a significant barrier to exiting also spoke of the desire to regain connection with children as a force that helped pull them out. Cathy, a 52-year-old woman who spent 27 years in sex trade industry work, explained when she had a "glimmer of hope that I would be reunited with my kids- that kept me going." The glimmer of hope that Cathy held onto is not sufficiently recognized or addressed in programming available to former sex trade industry workers. For example, Tracey described leaving a residential treatment program because she wanted more contact with

her daughters than the program permitted. She initially left the program as a result, but her 14-year-old daughter told her to go back:

Whenever we looked at digital clocks, like if it was 1:11, 2:22, or 11:11, whatever, if it was all the same number, we used to say, 'Oh, make a wish' or you know, "Say a prayer", or whatever. And my daughter said, 'Mom, at 5:55 every morning and at 5:55 every night, I pray for you.' She said, 'Go back. We're going to be okay. ("*Tracey*")

She made the choice to stay at the residential program and successfully graduated one year later. She said that her children were the primary reasons she was successful, and explained how a staff member at the program advocated for her to spend extra time with her children. Porsche, a 58-year-old woman who spent 31 years in sex trade industry work, told of a similarly pivotal moment with her grown daughter when she was recovering from life threatening injuries resulting from an assault by a customer:

I felt her squeeze my hand and she said, "Mother, I love you and my boys love you..." She said it just like that and I was done. I knew then I was done because my daughter only has me, I'm her only family. I'm the only grandmother my five grandsons have. ("*Porche*")

None of the women in this study described receiving services that intentionally helped them reestablish these connections, develop parenting skills, adjust to new responsibilities, or learn how to talk with children about their experiences in a developmentally appropriate way. None of the women who had custodial rights severed spoke about receiving support or help to process the loss of that connection, representing another important gap in service provision for mothers exiting sex trade industry work.

Spirituality

A final subtheme representing connection in the exiting process emerged from participants who described their spirituality. Almost half (n=7) of participants spoke about spiritual beliefs that helped provide hope and motivation to exit the sex trade

industry. While described by fewer participants, and in less depth than other sources of connection, several participants felt their success was made possible by believing God was able to change them in the ways that they felt powerless to change themselves. Shelly, a 37-year-old woman who spent five years in sex trade industry work, explained that upon initially exiting, she began “really getting spiritual” and credits her spirituality as having played a vital role in her successful exit. Jezebel, a woman who has been out of sex trade industry work for 27 years, recalled: “My faith that there really is a God and that if I just have a little bit of trust, he’d help me and that’s what sustained me.” Party Girl remembers a period of spiritual transformation in jail and “without the programs- the spiritual program...I feel I’d never made it.” Here she is referencing 12-step programming that emphasizes connection to a ‘higher power’ without identifying any particular religious affiliation.

Resources

A second overarching theme that emerged from participants’ narratives involved resources they accessed throughout the exiting process. This finding supports prior research (see Baker, et al., 2010) identifying the range of diverse and practical resources needed by women exiting sex trade industry work. However, the women in this study emphasized key elements of resources, illuminating the mechanisms that facilitated their ability to make significant changes in their lives. These key elements are conceptualized as: 1) networks, and 2) structure and safety.

Networks

The role of diverse networks is demonstrated in responses to the prompted question, “Can you tell me about the people who helped you get out?” They responded by

explaining the new and expanding network of supports developed upon exiting.

Descriptions included lists of people who met different needs, reflecting the creative ways in which women with few resources often build social capital (Oliver & Cheff, 2014). Sasha explained that as issues arose, she was able to reach out to more and more people including AA sponsors, helping professionals, family and friends: : “So it’s just a whole different network of people because there’s so many different frickin’ issues.”

Ness, a 31 year-old woman who was first sex trafficked at age 13, described her network as “the web of people I could call if I was really having a bad day”. Lori, a 48-year-old woman, told the story of relapsing when she began to use drugs and sell sex to pay for drugs. Friends from the prostitution-exiting program she attended came by her house, and her mother came and moved her belongings into a storage shed while she re-entered the program. Her newly established network of friends, family, and service providers helped her to find roommates and steady employment after years of living in isolation and chronic homelessness.

For participants who left behind their former social network in the process of exiting, resources that provided access to new positive social networks were vital. This included, in the experiences of nine women, relationships formed via contact with the criminal justice system. Several spoke specifically about probation and surveillance officers, judges, treatment providers in jail or prison, and police officers as part of their support networks. Maria, a 38-year-old woman who spent four years in sex trade industry work, talked about regular conversations with a vice enforcement officer she referred to as a “social worker with a gun” who would see her on the street, wait to speak with her, and eventually helped facilitate her entry into an alcohol rehabilitation program. Another

44-year-old participant who spent seven years in sex trade industry work also experienced positive relationships with law enforcement, saying:

Believe it or not, a lot of it [help] came from the police officers. They got tired of seeing me out there. You know, before it was like, ‘Hey [street name].’ you’re looking better, but when are you going to do something?’...that was part of my support system actually. (“*Crystal*”)

She explained she had a surveillance officer who would come over to check on her and stay for a while to help her study for the math portion of her upcoming General Education Development (GED) test³. Sarah had a similar experience:

As crazy as it may seem, probation is one of the huge things that saved my life and got me out of it because that probation officer and surveillance officer believed in me and every time they’d see me go off the path, they would put me back on it...my surveillance officer picked me up [from jail], took me directly to treatment for addiction and everything...they believed in me because they’d seen what I had done. It makes me cry. (“*Sarah*”)

Her example demonstrates how individuals within the criminal justice system can identify immediate needs (e.g. substance misuse) and provide both physical/tangible and emotional support. This is particularly important for women very isolated from positive social support, as the only people outside “the life” that they may have contact with criminal justice personnel.

Structure and safety

Fifteen participants talked about receiving formal support services during the exiting process. Nearly all of these participants initially enrolled in drug and alcohol treatment (including detox programs) before engaging in any services that addressed other issues, including experience in the sex trade industry and/or sex trafficking victimization. A few women received outpatient drug and alcohol treatment while living

³ The GED provides a credential equivalent to a high school diploma.

in a residential program for prostituted women. Six participants specifically mentioned utilizing counseling services (individual or group) and several spoke about 12-step meetings.

When describing experiences with formal support services, many women spoke about the structure, safety, and security these programs provided. Cleo Little, a 51-year-old woman who was trafficked at age 16 and spent nearly 28 years in sex trade industry work, described how choosing to enter a residential program “saved” her life because it provided safety, even when it felt unfamiliar and uncomfortable. Samantha, a 49-year-old woman who spent 17 years in sex trade industry work, described her halfway house in the same way, saying, “[It] saved my life because that was where I was taught structure. You got up every morning. Your meals were served at a certain time. You had to leave to go to work or look for a job. There was a curfew. So it was very structured.” Structure provided a foundation for relearning life skills essential to constructing a new routine that did not involve sex industry work or drug use. The importance of (re)building this foundation is made evident in Monique’s description of how difficult it can be to reestablish basic living skills: “There’s no kind of regular skills for us at all, period. House cleaning, none of that...when you’re doing dope that’s all you know. You do [cleaning] between dates and fix[ing] yourself up, you know?” She went on to describe how she is relearning these skills, along with other aspects of daily life: “I watch TV to learn, you know, about clothes and what music and, you know, things like that.”

Like Lori and Samantha, Tracey enrolled in a residential program to help develop these skills:

We were never alone, and I just- the presence, that safety, that security, that accountability was- that was the thing that I think kept me there, kept me bonded

to the staff, kept me bonded to the other women...they held us really close to them...and that was what was important to me. (*Tracey*)

Her perception of a program that offered structure whilst ‘holding’ participants close demonstrates how structure can be helpful without feeling paternalistic or punitive. This is vital for women who have experienced involuntary structure imposed by traffickers, other abusive partners, or criminal justice system involvement.

Personal Growth

A third and final theme, prevalent throughout participants’ narratives but discussed with less depth and intensity, was the role of personal growth in changing participants’ perspectives of their experiences and current circumstances. Part of this growth occurred as they experienced new feelings of empowerment, improved self-esteem, and the development of a new identity that incorporated- but was not dictated by- their former lives, echoing the identity change process described by Fuchs Ebaugh (1988). This growth also occurred as a fear of the consequences associated with not exiting the sex trade industry accumulated.

Eleven women discussed feelings of empowerment defined here as confidence, self-esteem, self-worth, being valued, accepted or trusted by others, feeling capable and educated, and believing they had the skills to advocate for their own needs. Lori described empowerment as “positive reinforcement all the time”. Maria said that after exiting the sex trade industry, she knew she was “valued and that my opinion counts and that I’m actually capable, which is worth its weight in gold.” Angelica told a story of regaining custody of her daughter. Before exiting, her sister and brother-in-law had custody of her daughter and because she was not consistently in her daughter’s life, she felt powerless to regain parental rights and responsibilities. After exiting, her brother-in-

law realized “that he couldn’t control me anymore. For him it was all about controlling...but I wouldn’t play his game...I refused to let him do that to me.” While feeling confident and empowered is a personal experience, social workers and other service providers can provide opportunities to develop skills, demonstrate responsibility, and practice pro-social behavior, and positively affirm that their goals are within reach.

Eight women discussed coming to a point just before exiting or after they had exited the sex trade industry when the consequences of staying in- including legal consequences such as felony⁴ charges or prison time, more violence, or further separation from children- were among the factors that drove them to exit and stay out of sex trade industry work. Ness explained the strength of this fear saying, “I think the only thing that I needed to get sober was a healthy fear of consequences and a healthy fear for my life. Those two things are the only things that finally made me get out.” Four other women referred to a fear of continued violence, even losing their lives if they remained involved in selling or trading sex: “I can remember, even one time, it just seems like I felt like I saw my coffin and I’m hearing bells and everything going on, and I remember being so afraid” (*Party Girl*). Tracey feared that as her children grew, they would not want to continue being in her life because she had not been actively engaged as a. Annie recalled recognizing that if she re-entered the sex trade industry, she would be tempted to use drugs again, and so the desire to stay sober helped keep her out. A number of participants talked about a fear of accumulating criminal charges; Shelly explained that this fear “Was good because that was a boundary for me. Some people don’t care, but for me it was a

⁴ Felony crimes in the US are more serious than misdemeanour crimes and are punishable by longer jail or prison sentences. Collateral consequences of a felony conviction include ineligibility for welfare benefits, student loans, loss of voting rights, and housing restrictions (Chin, 2002).

boundary that I didn't wanna cross, getting a felony...once I was starting to get out, I didn't wanna go back to jail." This subtheme supports prior research that has identified both dramatic turning points and gradual transitions out (Baker, et al., 2010; Sanders, 2007) as common experiences among women leaving the sex trade industry.

Discussion

While barriers that hinder exiting the sex trade industry have often been a focus of research (Baker, et al., 2010). However, elements that provide help and promote resiliency are not often emphasized, though countless individuals do successfully exit, including those who experienced sexual exploitation and trafficking. The women in this study spoke at length about personal, social, and physical resources that helped them out and formed what Meschke and Patterson (2003) described as the chain of protective factors composing resiliency. Their experiences can inform policy and practice both in the United States and elsewhere, and have particular relevance to social work practitioners tasked with meeting the complex needs of adults and young people who have experienced sex trafficking and sexual exploitation.

Participants' discussions about personal resources are represented in the 'personal growth' theme. Social resources included the connections formed with children and other survivors, and physical resources were provided through accessing formal support services and through the development of networks that created access to increased social capital (e.g. friend networks, other survivors, police). Women developed resilience throughout the exiting process as they invested in the resources that became available to them despite the continuing presence of adverse circumstances. Their experiences contrast with Cecchet and Thoburn's (2014) recent study on survivors of child sex

trafficking, in which they described participants as having “naturally resilient personalities” (p. 480). The women in this study demonstrate resiliency as a dynamic process, not a personality trait; this is evident in the narratives of those who spoke about feeling empowered through opportunities that others provided. Examples include teaching new skills, trusting and encouraging them, and acknowledging each success. For some, this also included opportunities to explore and strengthen spiritual beliefs, often in conjunction with access to faith communities and the social support found therein.

Sasha’s experience exemplifies how a chain of protective factors contributed to her resiliency in the exiting process. She was victimized by sex trafficking for nearly two decades, moved across the United States under the control of several different pimps/traffickers. She then continued involvement in the sex trade industry to support a drug addiction. She exited gradually, beginning the process while living in the same neighborhood that she had always used drugs and traded sex. She continued along a path of successfully exiting by drawing upon internal/personal resources (spirituality, fear of consequences related to drug use) strengthened by the availability of social resources, including friends from church who offered tangible assistance such as clothing and transportation to events that helped establish a new routine.

This example of the positive impact that supportive relationships can have on building resiliency echoes prior research on exiting the sex trade industry (Hedin & Månsson, 2004). However, the in-depth exploration of supportive relationships provided in this study offers new information regarding the unique role that survivors and peer mentors play in helping women develop resilience. The 16 women who spoke about peers who supported them echo Hotaling, et al. (2004), who recommended that programs

help women exit must involve former sex trade industry workers. This is true for both women who experienced sex trafficking victimization and those who did not. While the women in this study sometimes encountered these peers through coincidence (e.g. at a 12-step meeting), organizations working with sex trade industry workers should prioritize peer mentorship and survivor involvement as an essential component of service provision. The importance of experiential knowledge held exclusively by peers is well established in the substance misuse recovery literature (Solomon, 2004). Findings from this study suggest the vital role that peer support/peer provided services has for this population and should become a core part of service delivery.

This study also shed light on the important role that police and other criminal justice personnel can play in offering social resources that help women develop resiliency. While only nine participants described positive experiences with criminal justice personnel, the experiences were framed as essential to their exiting process. This finding has broad implications, as sex work remains criminalized throughout much of the world and women involved in sex trafficking situations are often involved in illegal activity that makes them indistinguishable from women involved in illegal sex trade industry work (Finn, et al., 2014). This is also true for women who entered a country illegally (and are penalized for their immigration status without consideration of their experiences in forced or coerced sex work), and women like Sasha who were victimized by sex trafficking but engage in criminalized behavior long after they leave sex traffickers. Criminal justice-involved trafficking victims often present as individuals with agency because they are involved in some form of criminal activity and are thus not ‘ideal victims’ (Hoyle, et al., 2011). As a result, they may not be offered sex trafficking-

specific services. This is particularly relevant for sex trafficked adults as much of the attention garnered within anti-trafficking organizations is focused on the ‘ideal’ innocence represented in child and adolescent victims (Baker, 2015).

The women in this study demonstrate that when police and criminal justice personnel prioritize engagement, trust-building, and promote alternatives to incarceration, positive outcomes can be achieved. For many, contact with the criminal justice system represented some of the only contact they had with people outside their negative social networks (e.g. pimps, exploitative friends, and drug dealers). Education and support for criminal justice personnel that reflects the important role they can play in the lives of vulnerable women is needed.

Implications for social work practice

As a profession, social work offers an important, nuanced perspective on sex trafficking victimization. Social work is defined by its mission of social justice and advocacy on behalf of vulnerable people (Orme & Ross-Sheriff, 2015). The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) has stated unequivocally that social work is a ‘human rights profession’ (IFSW, 2010, p. 5), and is thus concerned with the ways in which sex trafficking victimization violates human rights. However the topic has not, until recently, been widely discussed in social work practice and research (Alvarez & Alessi, 2012).

Social work generally acknowledges the role that structural problems (e.g. unemployment, poverty, racism, access to healthcare) play in increasing vulnerability to a range of social injustices, and should approach working with sex trade industry workers (trafficked or not) from this perspective (Alvarez & Alessi, 2012). Findings from this

study reveal the specific need for social work interventions that engage and support women with children who are involved in sex trade industry work, and echo Sloss and Harper's (2004) research on American street-based sex workers with children, as they recommend increased attention (research, policy, and practice) should be given to the unique needs of sex trade industry workers who are mothers.

Social workers are well-positioned to lead on developing best practice approaches to working with these mothers, as front line social workers throughout the world interact with sex trade industry workers and their children, including those trafficked into the sex industry. Nearly all of the women with children in this study lost custody of their children at some point. They spoke of intense grief and regret upon losing their children, as they had not lived up to their own expectations or the expectations of how society defines a 'good' mother. Children were referenced as a primary motivation to quit sex working in order to undergo treatment for substance misuse, but participants experienced limited support to help navigate the legal requirements for regaining custody of children. Furthermore, they were not given access to housing assistance that permitted them to live with their children. In order to provide a complete 'chain of protective factors' for women voluntarily exiting sex trade industry work or escaping sex trafficking situations, they must have access to services that acknowledge them as mothers and help them achieve goals such as reuniting with children, transitioning back into a parenting role, or processing grief associated with having lost custody of children. Social workers in a variety of sectors (e.g. substance misuse, supportive housing, mental health, child protection) may interact with mothers who demonstrate barriers to parenting that result from being exploited/trafficked or stigmatized for participation in legal sex work. In each

of these settings, effective social work practice requires accurately identifying these barriers (i.e. emotional, relational, financial), and engaging in relationship-based, trauma-informed practice (Muraya & Fry, 2015; Orme & Ross-Sheriff, 2015).

Social workers often work in the context of multi-agency teams and should consider how to best seek partnerships with police and healthcare professionals that lead to more effective treatment through coordinated service planning, and when possible, co-located service provision (Schwartz & Britton, 2015). Social workers are trained in assessing people within the context of multiple environments and so are well-positioned to best identify a range of diverse needs across ecosystems (McIntyre, 2014), to build trust with individuals reluctant to engage with services (Kuosmanen & Starke, 2011), to partner with vulnerable women and promote their empowerment (Blyth, 2008) and to advocate for policies that reduce vulnerability to sex trafficking victimization (Orme & Ross-Sheriff, 2015).

Future research

Research, policy, and practice throughout the world is increasingly focused on finding the best way to intervene in the lives of sexually exploited individuals, and it will be increasingly important to know how social workers can help these individuals develop the kind of resiliency that facilitates successful exiting and recovery. Future research should explore effective ways in which protective factors can be embedded to promote resiliency in programs working with sex trafficking victims. Future research should also seek to explore the exiting process among men and transgender individuals and among minor victims of sexual exploitation and sex trafficking. While our collective awareness of forced and coerced sex trade industry involvement grows throughout the world, much

remains unknown about the gender, cultural, and developmental differences in victims' treatment needs. Researchers should focus on testing interventions to further develop the empirical knowledge base within this field, and this should include longitudinal research that can help tell the story of "exiting" as it unfolds.

Another area of research that should be developed further is in identifying and testing effective social work interventions for sexually exploited women with children. Social workers should seek to identify effective ways of helping women with children exit sexually exploitative situations, as motherhood is an important part of their identity and being able to parent children is a significant part of recovery. Finally, research and policy efforts to help children and adults victimized by sex trafficking and sexual exploitation should seek to address the financial barriers to exiting and the structural inequalities that create vulnerability to exploitation and trafficking throughout the world.

Research Ethics

Ethical approval for this project was given by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Arizona State University.

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